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PROCESS OF MEOS' CONVERSION TO ISLAM

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Meos, a brave, freedom-loving and warring community have had a glorious history from the ancient times. They could never be made to compromise by force or political diplomacy. That's why they were against any power or government which tried to over-power or impose their authority over this warring community. No doubt, in their so-called freedom struggle, they lost their men and money and sometimes their very existence faced the threat of being wiped out. It is also true that in their long history there have been very few leaders who gave them proper direction for upholding their honour, dignity and position. Most of their leaders only took pride in their stiff opposition to the government in Delhi as their biggest and greatest achievement. It was mainly due to their illiteracy as well as the negligence on the part of the government in Delhi that made them rebellious.¹

In the ancient period they were known as Meds and their stronghold was Debal, a famous port of Sindh. They were engaged in agriculture and if we believe Elliot and Dowson, many of them were seafarers and pirates.² After they embraced Islam, they were called Meos.³ At present the area of Mewat is very small, and is distributed among different states like Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. In Haryana, Mewat includes some parts of Gurgaon and Faridabad districts. In Rajasthan, it comprises of parts of Alwar and Bharatpur. In U.P., it includes some villages of Aligarh and Mathura Districts.⁴ It must not be forgotten that the Meos were a warring community and troublesome to the British Government, that's why the government cunningly divided the area of Mewat into many parts controlled by various administrative authorities.

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1. Wahiduddin Khan, Maulana, *Mewat Ka Safar*, Delhi, 1988, p. 6.
2. Elliot & Dowson, *The History of India as told by its own Historians*, Vol. I, Allahabad, 1969, p. 124 (Hereafter quoted as Elliot & Dowson).
3. Mewati, Mohammad Habibur Rahman Khan, *Tazkira Sufia-i-Mewat*, Delhi, 1985, p. 69 (Hereafter cited as *Tazkira*).
4. Abdul Shakoor, *Tarikh-i-Meo Kshatriya*, Delhi, 1975. p. 114.

When we look at the geographical history of the Meos, we have to contend with a large number of traditional sayings and even many Meo scholars who claim that their geography consisted of many parts of Arabia, China, Central Asia and whole of India. But we can only give this aboriginal geographical claim as mere rhetoric and bragging with not an iota of truth about it. As the historical evidences prove the Meos can only be traced during the ancient period in the region of Sindh in the form of Meds. Another major community that lived with them was the Jat community. They both were agriculturists in profession and also barbarian in nature. Their rulers were Brahman by caste.⁵ When did the Meos migrate to the Indian Arawali Region (Koh paya, according to *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*) is not very clear. It also cannot be said with certainty as to whether they originally inhabited this region. But a Meo scholar Maulana Habibur Rahman Khan claims that around second century A.D., a group of the Meds of Sindh entered Rajputana and settled around the Arawali range and this area came to be known as Med-pat and later on Mewat.⁶ In the light of all such opinions it can safely be concluded that the Meos' population around Arawali was also much older.

James Tod describes that the Mer or Med were a very ancient Hindu race.⁷ Habibur Rahman, by quoting *Chachnama*, claims that the Meds were followers of Buddhism.⁸ Another scholar, Shamsuddin Shams tries to prove that the Meos formerly belonged to the Hindu race.⁹ But most of the old traditions agree with the opinion that before accepting Islam Meos followed the Buddhism. No doubt they claim themselves as Rajputs and Kshatriyas by origin and they still follow their customs and traditions, but as far as religion is concerned, they followed the Buddhist cult. Because in Sindh, the original place of the Meos, the rulers and subjects followed the Buddhism. Chach (father of Dahir) the ruler of Brahmanabad was a Brahman but was very much under the influence of a Buddhist devotee Kirman.¹⁰ After Chach his brother Chander ascended the throne and patronized the Buddhist religion and monks and promulgated their doctrine.¹¹ It was the trend at that time that when a king patronized and promulgated any religion the subjects also followed

5. Elliot & Dowson, Vol.-I, p. 124; see also *Tazkira*, p. 53.

6. *Tazkira*, p. 35.

7. James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Delhi 1971, p. 717.

8. *Tazkira*, p. 53.

9. Shamsuddin Shams, *Meos' of India*, New Delhi, 1983. p. 34.

10. Elliot & Dowson, Vol. I, p. 151.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

the same. From all this it becomes amply evident that the Meds of that region must have followed the religion of their rulers.

The modern Mewat region (Arawali range) was also a stronghold of the Meos. Here the Meos might have practised both Hindu and Buddhist religions, as they still claim that they are from the Rajput origin. Minas and Jats of this region also practised the same customs.¹² All this proves that Meds or Meos, Minas and Jats were of the same origin and they separated from each other for their social and political interests. Definitely the Meos of Mewat practised mostly Hindu religion but it also can not be ignored that the last ancient Indian emperor Harshvardhana was a follower of Buddhism and he might have left its impact on this region and some of the Meos might have followed this religion also. For the Meos it was clear that whatever religion they had practised they did not forsake the customs and traditions of their forefathers. Actually the Meo community was an amphibious community which perhaps practised both Buddhist and Hindu rituals.

Islam came in India along with Mohammad bin Qasim in 93H or 712 A.D. At this time the Khalifa was Walid bin Abdul Malik of Ummayyad dynasty. This was the golden period of Islam because at that time Islam not only spread in India but in Central Asia also. In Central Asia, Tartars and Turks were the most famous to accept Islam.¹³ While despatching Mohammad bin Qasim to Sindh, the governor of Khurasan Hajjaj bin Yousuf gave instructions that he would rule the Sindh leniently and have cordial relations with the subjects, and the preaching of Islam would also be one of his aim.¹⁴ Mohammad bin Qasim attacked Sindh, defeated and killed Dahir, the king of Sindh, and issued a letter to the chiefs of different parts of Sindh inviting them to make submission and embrace Islam. This letter got a favourable response and the minister of Dahir, Sisakar came to his side and became *wazir* of Mohammad bin Qasim. Mohammad bin Qasim told him all his secrets, always took his advice and consulted him on all civil affairs of the government.¹⁵ His another trusted Indian follower Maula-i-Islam, Debli preached Islam in various parts of Sindh and got a favourable response.¹⁶

The rule of Mohammad bin Qasim was very lenient and the subjects (Meds and Jats) were given freedom to live in their houses in whatever manner they liked and worship their gods.¹⁷ But in 715-16 A.D. he was called back

12. James Tod, p. 789; see also Siddique Ahmad, *Mewat Ek Khoj*, Delhi, 1997, p. 44.

13. *Tazkira*, p. 43.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

15. Elliot & Dowson, Vol. I, pp. 175-176.

16. *Tazkira*, p. 177.

17. J.L. Mehta, *Advanced Study in the History of Medieval India*, Vol. I, p. 39.

and charged of moral turpitude and put to death. Elliot and Dowson, by quoting *Futuhul Badan* of Al-Biladury writes that the people of Hind (Sindh) wept for Mohammad bin Qasim.¹⁸ The subjects must have accepted Islam because of the lenient and cordial rulers. Because before the invasion of Mahmud Ghaznavi there was no trace of the term *Malichcha* which was later on derogatorily given to the Muslims.¹⁹ In 99H. (718 A.D.) the new Khalifa Umar bin Abdul Aziz wrote a letter of *Tabligh* to Indian Rajas which read like this, "You accept Islam, come out of the darkness of idolatory. If you will accept Islam then your suzerainty will be intact, your sins will be forgiven, you will be treated like other Muslims and you will be accepted as our brothers."²⁰

As these Princes had already heard about the Khalifa keeping his promises and about his character, they accepted Islam and their subjects also followed them. Jaisia, the son of Raja Dahir also turned Muslim and took an Arab name.²¹ Till that time the Meos of Arawali region were still untouched by Islam. In 160 H. (779 A.D.), during the time of Khwaja Abu Abdullah, some portion of Arawali region was conquered and the Meos came into contact with Islam. But the complete Islamic practice was absent from their day to day life. After that till 1012 A.D. the history of Arawali region did not witness any Muslim conquest.²² When Mahmud Ghaznavi invaded India, the conversion restarted here at a large scale. His companions were good scholars and preachers of Islam who started their work with confidence and got a favourable response. Among them the first and foremost preacher was Shaikh Abu Shakoor.²³ After him Syed Salar Masood Ghazi²⁴ continued his work by conquest and *Tabligh* both.

18. Elliot & Dowson, Vol. I, p. 124.

19. J.L. Mehta, p. 40.

20. *Tazkira*, p. 45; see also Elliot & Dowson, Vol. I, p. 125.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

24. Syed Salar Masood Ghazi was the son of Satar Ma'ali the sister of Mahmud Ghaznavi. His father Sahu bin Ataullah Ghazi was the governor of Ajmer. Salar was born in 405H. in Ajmer. He fought many battles with Indian Rajas of Delhi, Kannauj, Kara, Manakpur etc. According to the local traditions he owned 989 forts. He was also a reputed Sufi saint. His tomb is in Bahraich (U.P.) where both the Hindus and Muslims come to pay him respects. In Mewat area also he is loved and respected even today. Till 1960-70, in many villages of Mewat, the custom of saluting the flag of Syed Salar Masood Ghazi was prevalent. In that custom the *Mujawars* (servants of Ghazi) used to bring the flag and hoisted it in the village *Chopal*. The children and women devotees offered *Nazar-o-Neyaz* and youths performed military drill. On the third day of the ceremony the *Mujawars* departed along with the flag. Another practice was the worship of flag of Syed Salar Ghazi, but due to the influence of the *Maulvis* and *Tabligh* movement these practices slowly and gradually came to an end. (*Tazkira*, pp. 67-68 and 180).

Munshi Mohammad Makhdoom Thanavi (a Tahsildar of Tijara in Alwar State) writes that when Syed Salar Masood Ghazi arrived in Mewat region, five Meo Pals²⁵ belonging to Rajput Tomar Dynasty accepted Islam. These Pals were as follows :²⁶

1. Detrawal or Derwal, 2. Latawat, 3. Ratawat, 4. Balut, 5. Pahat.

During the reigns of Mohammad Gouri, Aibek and Iltutmish, many Meos embraced Islam as a result of the efforts of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti²⁷ of Ajmer. His *Khanqah* was open to both Hindus and Muslims. The Meos must have come in contact with this Sufi and embraced Islam like many other non-Muslims. Qutbuddin Aibak sent Miran Syed Husain Khang Sawar to Mewat and some Meos accepted Islam as a result of his efforts.²⁸ Munshi Mohammad Makhdoom Thanvi writes that at the hands of Miran Syed Husain Khang Sawar, seven Pals of the Meos accepted Islam. These were as follows :²⁹

1. Dehengal, 2. Sengal, 3. Chhirklot, 4. Damrut, 5. Pandlot, 6. Dulot, 7. Nyai.

Miran Syed Husain Khang Sawar along with the Meos fought many battles with non-Muslims.³⁰

It is an undeniable fact that since the very beginning, Meos always fought for their independence, whether they were Muslims or non-Muslims, they were always rebellious against Delhi rulers, and Mewat was the shelter place for the rebellious Sardars of Delhi. They were always a fiercely independent people and never permanently accepted the suzerainty of Delhi. It is quite clear from the facts and incidents that Mewat was never permanently

25. In Hindi *Pal* means a group or party. These were named after the names of their chieftains and predecessors. Many *Gotras* combine to make a *Pal*. (*Tarikh-i-Meo Kshatriya*, p. 250).

26. *Tazkira*, p. 70.

27. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, a great saint of that period came to India from Khurasan and settled in Ajmer. The tradition has it that before his arrival to India he heard a voice while performing *Tawaf* of *Kaaba* that he should go to Madina. In Madina Prophet appeared to him in his dream and said "the almighty has entrusted the country of India to thee. Go there and settle in Ajmer. By God's help the faith of Islam shall, by thy piety and that of thy followers, be spread in that land." (Elliot & Dowson, Vol. II, p. 548; see also *Tazkira*, p. 69).

28. *Gazetteer of India*, Haryana, Distt. Gurgaon, 1983, p. 36.

29. *Tazkira*, p. 71.

30. We still find the graves in most of the villages and cities of Mewat. The most important of these graves are of Bhikam Shahid, Ghalib Shahid, Muzaffar Shahid, Khwaja Rukne Alam Shahid, Roshan Shahid, Hamid Shahid etc. They still has followers and devotees from both the Hindu and Muslim communities (*Tazkira*, p. 72).

conquered.³¹ As this area was very tough for invaders, the first Muslim ruler Qutbuddin Aibak sent Hemraj, the son of Prithvi Raj Chauhan to invade Mewat, but he was defeated and slain. Then he dispatched Syed Wajihuddin. He was also defeated and slain.³² Wolseley Haig writes that the Meos plundered the travellers on the roads, entered the city by night and robbed the inhabitants of their belongings.³³ James Tod called them notorious and lawless people.³⁴ Minhaj Siraj writes that in Koh-Paya (hill tract of Mewat) near the capital, there was a community of obdurate rebels who unceasingly committed highway robberies and plundered the property of Musalmans.³⁵

In 1259-60 they carried off herds and camels, the property of Vassals and loyal followers of Ulugh Khan's (Balban, the wazir of Nasiruddin Mahmud) household from the outskirts of the Hansi territory. Their leader was Malka (from the Hindu faith). Then Ulugh Khan attacked Mewat and combed them under swords for twenty days.³⁶ When Balban became the ruler of Delhi he again massacred the Meos so they would not rise again, and they became cordial with the Turks for at least 100 years.³⁷ In order to strengthen the Meos against Balban a Tomar chieftain Balut Meo Kaku Rana reorganized the *Gotra*³⁸ and *Pal* system and redivided the Meos into 13 *Pals* and 52 *Gotras*. The Meos' rebellious and suspicious nature and urge for independence created suspicion and misunderstanding among the Muslim rulers. Even a ruler like Aurangzeb did not give much attention to the Meo community. He preferred to favour the Hindus who agreed to accept his unquestioning over-lordship than Muslims who would claim even insignificant equality on the basis of a common religion.³⁹

Meos, due to their illiteracy and innocence thought that calling themselves

31. *Gazetteer*, p. 37.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

33. Welseley Haig, *The Cambridge History of India*, Vol. III, Delhi, 1965, p. 76.

34. James Tod, p. 717.

35. Minhajuddin Siraj, *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*, translation of H.G. Raverty, Delhi, 1970, p. 850.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 850-52.

37. Mohammad Habib and Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Dilli Sultanate* (Hindi tran.) Part-II, Delhi, 1978, p. 99.

38. *Gotra* is a Sanskrit word meaning common house. It is said that initially when the people started settling themselves, they constructed a large common house to protect themselves from enemies and wild animals. The common house was named as *Gotras* and inhabitants of that house were considered as people of the same *Gotra*. (*Tarikh-i-Meo Kshatria*, p. 245).

39. Hashim, Amir Ali, *The Meos of Mewat*, New Delhi, 1967, pp. 33-34.

independent and not accepting the rule of Delhi was their biggest and glorious action. On the other hand the rulers of Delhi also, without, knowing the truth and removing the misconception, crushed them brutally.⁴⁰ If the Delhi rulers had tackled them favourably and shown right direction to this brave community, they must have proved quite useful for the Delhi rulers and would have also changed their rebellious nature and disloyalty. From all these facts it becomes quite clear that the Meos did not accept Islam under any compulsion but through the teachings of various Sufi saints who were by no means rigid or bigoted. They realized the unity of God and also the oneness of mankind.

We also can not ignore the fact that these Muslim Meos never forgot the old customs of their forefathers. They were closer to the Hindus of Mewat than to the Muslims of the rest of India. The customs of the Hindus and Muslims combined as integral part of the Meos' cultural heritage. Regarding this a popular saying is quoted here "*Jat Kya Hindu Aur Meo Kya Musalman*."⁴¹ The customs and traditions of the Meos invited the attention of the Muslim theologians in the beginning of the 20th century. They were led by Maulana Mohammad Ilyas who started the *Tabligh* movement in Mewat aiming at religious and social purification and uplift of the Meo community in particular and to make Muslims in general aware of the true Islam.

40. *Mewat Ka Safar*, p. 6.

41. *Meos of India*, p. 36.